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Reading Guide to  
Karl Marlantes, *What It Is Like to Go to War*.  
New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2011.

Jay Mechling, Ph.D.  
Professor Emeritus of American Studies  
University of California, Davis

The first thing that needs to be said is that there is not one set of meanings to find in reading Marlantes's memoir. Each reader brings to this book a unique set of life experiences, and we would expect that age, gender, ethnicity, social class, and other human particularities will color the reading of the book.

There are many war memoirs, including many by veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (by both men and women), and most of these memoirs tell the story of the growth of the individual warrior. Often the male memoirist casts this growth as an **initiation** from boyhood to manhood, as a series of experiences of transition from one state to another, as a series of **tests of masculinity** to be met. Boot camp is the first great initiation; like a **religious conversion** in a cult, basic training (boot camp) erases the old identity (shaved head, new clothes, new nickname—Kubrick's Vietnam War film, *Full Metal Jacket* [1987], captures this perfectly) and establishes under great physical and psychic stress a new identity, in this case identity as a Marine.

Marlantes is one of only a few male memoirists who both gives us his own story and steps back to comment on larger patterns in American culture. Marlantes explores in this book **the socialization of boys and men in American culture**.

The influence of the **Mythopoetic Men's Movement** of the 1980s and early 1990s permeates this book. This men's consciousness-raising movement criticized the socialization of American boys and men into what William Pollack (*Real Boys*, 1998) calls "the boy code," a code of showing toughness, never showing emotions, and valuing independence over dependence (seen as feminine). Through its books, speakers, and gatherings, the Mythopoetic Men's Movement urged men to break this cycle of training and, among other things, to unleash the feminine energy and principle within every man and to nurture a different, mature masculinity (the depth psychology of Carl Jung is central to the movement). Mythology scholar Joseph Campbell and poet Robert Bly—Bly's 1990 book, *Iron John*, make appearances in Marlantes's book-- but the themes and language Marlantes uses throughout the book more broadly reflect male Mythopoetic thinking. Marlantes's use of Jung in talking about male initiations is an example of this.

Consider these **keywords** and phrases as you read, reread, and discuss this book (Marlantes's chapter titles are a good clue to the themes).

**Tests of manhood.** Masculinity, despite its usual bravado, actually is a fragile construction in constant need of bolstering and repair. Masculinity in the U.S. is defined as a negative, as “**not feminine.**” Establishing, performing, and repairing a masculine identity (usually a heterosexual performance) within the male friendship groups of boys and young men usually involves a distancing of the boy or man from the feminine; this is why so much of the joking and teasing in boys’ friendship groups are misogynist and homophobic. One “proves” his manhood by meeting and passing “tests,” though the tests never seem to end and “manhood” never is a state achieved once and for all. Marlantes tells stories about a great many tests in this book.

**Male violence.** The embarrassing, terrible “secret” Marlantes shares with the reader is that war is exhilarating, that (as he says on page 160), “Combat is the crack cocaine of all excitement highs—with crack cocaine costs.” And this: “Warrior energy is fierce and wild. It upsets men who don’t have it, and women who are afraid of it, primarily because the only form of it they know is the negative one that results in repression” (pp. 217-18). This important passage warrants much discussion, including why other men both fear and envy the energy of the warrior, why women fear it, and why the only options seem to be expressing or repressing that energy.

**The shadow.** Marlantes taps Jung for language and understanding about “the shadow” that lurks in every male. Chapter 5, “The Enemy Within,” explores this dark side of human nature, and it is here that Marlantes discusses the uncomfortable (for him and for most readers) examples of **atrocities**. Look at his distinctions between “white heat” and “red heat,” both understandable in the cycle of rage, guilt, and repression. But he adds an unexpected third category—the “atrociousness of the fallen standard”—and the examples here are, in their way, far more disturbing to Marlantes and the reader. Marlantes here is taking the view that what one does in combat **injures the soul**. Edward Tick, a therapist who works with Vietnam War veterans who suffer from PTSD, sees the syndrome as “soul loss” (*War and the Soul*, 2005). Like Marlantes, Tick draws upon the depth psychologies of Jung and others to confront the shadow and, like Marlantes, he sees the cure in the invention of new deeply symbolic rituals for the warriors.

**Loyalty.** One thing clear from most warriors’ memoirs is that in the heat of combat they are not fighting for country, or flag, or “freedom,” or Mom, or apple pie—they are fighting for the soldier to the left and the soldier to the right. Their greatest fear is doing something that gets a fellow warrior hurt or killed. The loyalty is to the relatively small friendship group that is “the unit”—it can be a small fireteam, a squad, a platoon of 30-40. Worth noting in the chapter (7) about “loyalty” is what Marlantes writes about “the dark side of loyalty.”

**Heroism.** Another chapter title. Note Marlantes’s frank discussion of the desire to win medals. And then listen to the public speeches of recent Congressional Medal of Honor winners; listen to their humility at being called “heroes” (and this links back to the “loyalty” issues).

**Women.** The warrior world described by Marlantes is very male. In Vietnam, the combatants were almost always men. Women appeared in that world as nurses (see the television series, *China Beach*), as prostitutes, or as civilian victims of violence. Ch. 8, “Home,” has more on women than any other passages in the book. Veterans’ memoirs and therapists’ accounts often note that compulsive sex is one of those ways— along with drugs, alcohol, and risky behavior—that warriors and veterans use to either numb their feelings or try to escape the numbing. Marlantes’s account of avoiding sex with Marlee Ann has much to talk about, and then he offers this: “It is primarily women who integrate the warrior back into society” (p. 190). So men’s capacity for violence (the shadow) and the emotional numbness many veterans bring back from the war serve to frighten women and push them away; at the same time, women (says Marlantes) are key to reintegrating the warrior back into society. Note, too, that Marlantes see that the warriors’ finding the feminine in himself (a key notion in the Mythopoetic Men’s Movement) is necessary for that reintegration: “My body was trying to tell me I was choking the feminine, but I didn’t get it” (p. 186)

An important difference between the military in the Vietnam War and the military in the first Gulf War and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is that women have been present in the combat zone and as fellow combatants. Marlantes does not speculate on the possible changes in the intensely male culture of the fighting unit when women are included. But we can speculate. (PTSD rates are higher among women soldiers and veterans of the recent wars, and the trauma experienced by women often is as much sexual assault as living and fighting in a combat zone. The sexual assault by someone you need to trust, and the additional trauma of a military culture that would rather not deal with sexual assaults on both women and men, compounds the trauma.)

**Prognosis.** Marlantes clearly believes that human nature, especially the nature of males, means that war and aggression and violence are with us forever, that the allure of the destructive, transcendent state experienced in war is too pleasurable. “Natural aggression, like sexuality,” he writes, “can either be repressed, to eventually emerge ugly and out of control, or it can be guided into healthy and productive uses” (p. 238). He has suggestions for the invention of new rituals and ceremonies both on the battlefield and off, but in some ways his most provocative—yet undeveloped—suggestion in the final chapter, “Relating to Mars,” is that “our greatest protection against falling into the thrall of the beast is children raised without shame and suppressed rage. This will ultimately demand a revolution of respect in child rearing” (p. 237). What might those new child-rearing practices look like?